

Shabbat 07 28 17 sermon

What do we say when people ask us questions that have no answers? What do we say when people inquire about matters and events that defy logic, that in some very profound way push us into a place of deep vulnerability vis-à-vis the question? When someone asks a question, they presumably imagine that you might have an answer. That's why they've asked it to you. And certainly as a rabbi, I have my share of questions that presume I have an inkling of an idea on how to answer it.

What do you do when you're sitting in a hospital room an hour before Shabbat, and an 18-year-old says, I have two weeks left with my 63-year-old father. Tell me, rabbi, why does that happen? What do you say? What does anyone say that could even begin to describe the mystery of how things are, how we find ourselves where we are? How we begin to describe what it feels like to be in the rubble, in the place of radical despair and depletion, a place of brokenness, a place where hope is hard to come by? We can, of course, answer, and there are no shortage of the answers that are given, and almost all of them, to some degree or another, will try to heal, will offer some medicine. Most of them are hard to swallow because they are an affront to our sensibilities.

Most of them are just a patina against the harsh realities of what we are given day to day. We are all human, and as human beings, we come up against suffering, immense suffering, mysterious suffering, illogical suffering, irrational suffering. What do we do when language breaks down? What do you do when the sequence of letters that you would normally put together in a row are scrambled? The algorithm doesn't work, you compute it, it doesn't go. What do we do? What do I do? Because I'm struggling. Certain weeks are harder than others, and this was a hard week.

I don't know about you, but for me, it was a hard week. It's like, can it get any worse? I keep wondering, should I even open up the news? And this isn't even a political conversation, I'm not talking about politics, I'm just talking about offensive, undignified things that you couldn't have imagined even three months ago, four months ago. The affront to transgender people, the affront to... We could make a list every week. It's like I listen to people, I don't even know what they're talking about anymore, I just wanna say, ouch! And then on the Jewish level, because it's the nine days, the saddest days of the Jewish calendar, it's just a thick time, you know, it's just thick.

We lifted ourselves up here tonight, but it's a thick time. Come Monday night, we schlep every imaginable destruction, every imaginable atrocity and trauma into one day, it's called the ninth day of Avedon. On a very deep level, we have given this gift to the world, we have sad days. Days that are dedicated to mitzahim, to being in a narrow place, days that are dedicated to not just saying, oh, how are you? Oh, everything is great.

I remember living in Israel, they used to say to me, you're an American, if I ask you how you are, you're just gonna say, it's great. No, it's not great during the nine days. These nine days are intentionally calendared. It's like here, can you set out nine days in your calendar for just being sad? Yeah, here I got nine days, right in the summer, right when everybody is having a

good time. We won't eat meat, won't listen to loud music, some people don't even wear laundered clothing, nothing joyous, no weddings.

So I'm struggling, I'm struggling with this thickness, with this intensity, and I'm struggling with the question that came after that question, which was, now what do I do with this? This young man asked me, what will I do with this that I have been given? After you tell me, Rabbi, why it happened, tell me what I should do with it. And then he said it to me, and I don't know about you, but he said, maybe you want to know the answer to this too, because he said the answer. And tomorrow morning in the Torah, and every year in the Torah before the ninth day of Av, the actual Shabbat that leads us into the saddest of the year also gives us that good advice.

So I want to know that good advice, how about you? Here's what he said, here's what he said. He said, I'm going to look for the answer. I'm going to look for the answer. And then I'm going to teach what I found. I'm going to look for the answer to the question that is gnawing at me. The question of suffering, it could be another question, I'm going to look for the answer, and I am then going to teach it. I'm going to live my life, and I'm going to ask the question, I'm going to go seeking for an answer, and then when I get the answer, I'm going to give it away. Because that's what it's all about. That's what he said to me, that's what it's all about.

He's 18 years old. So funnily enough, every single year, I'm 48 now, so 48 years, I've stood in synagogues on the Shabbat before the saddest day of the Jewish calendar, and we begin the fifth and final book of the books of Moses, of the teachings of Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our teacher. The book known in English as Deuteronomy, which begins with these words, it's not known as Deuteronomy in Hebrew, it's Elahad Devarim.

These are the Devarim, and these are the words that Moses spoke. The word Devarim, for the Hebrew speaker or listener, to all of us here, even if you've never heard this before, the word Devarim means, these are the words. And Moses was famously a man who said, Lo ish Devarim anochi. When Moses was asked about his role, what he was supposed to do, God said, you're going to go speak to Pharaoh. What did Moses say? Speak? Speak? Me? No, no, you got the wrong guy. I'm not the speaking type. I'm not Ingber, you know, getting up and talking and Jessica. That's not my thing. I'm not a speaker. You want me to take care of your sheep? No problem. Lo ish Devarim, and he uses that word Devarim.

Can you all say that word with me? Devarim. One more time, Devarim. This entire book is spoken by Moses. In fact, the rabbis asked, how could it be that Moses gets to have his own signature? Fifth book. And the Zohar, even in the 13th century says, שֶׁבִּנְתָּ דְּבָרַי מִפּוֹמִי דְּמוֹשֶׁה, that Moses was, if God was speaking to Moses, it's in the first person, it's not even, and God spoke to Moses saying, Moses just opens up and says, here, let me tell you these three discourses I'm going to tell you. According to the Midrash, I only have 36 days to live. Let me tell you how you should live your lives after these next 36 days. I'm going to die in 36 days. And Moses speaks. But wait a second, Moshe, you had a trauma, Moshe, you couldn't speak.

The hardest thing in the world for you, Moshe, was to speak. You probably spent nights wondering, God, why did you give me this wound? Why did you give me this here, cross to

bear? Why have you given me this question that now plagues me day and night? I have a goal, I have a destiny, I'm supposed to speak, but I can't speak. I'm not a man of divarim. But then I worked on it a lot. I practiced it a lot. I was marinating in the question. It bothered me. How can I find my voice? And finally, by the fifth books of Moses, he's like, okay, here we go. I'm going to throw it down. I'm going to wrap my divarim. This principle is known in Kabbalah, in Jewish mysticism, at Yirida, LeShem Aliyah. In Kabbalah, in Jewish mysticism, as Yirida, LeShem Aliyah.

You go down into the trauma, you go down into the pain, you go down, down, down, in order to go up, up, up. Moses needed to go down to the place of suffering to be able to come back up with words, special words. Words that could inspire, words that could tell people when it's really, really terrible. Look at me. It was bad for me too. I was scared. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to work with this pain, with this trauma, with this scar tissue. I didn't know what you wanted from me, God. What do you want from me? What's the answer, Rabbi? You know what, Rabbi? I don't need one. I'm going to look for it and then I'll teach it. You can imagine Moses saying the same thing to God.

You know, God, I don't know what words I'm going to use, but I'm going to look for the question that's gnawing at me and I will find an answer. I will go down to go up. I will go down to go up. I will go into the mud, into the pain, into the schmutz, into the nine days, into the shadow and I will extract the light that you want me to extract, that it is being asked to extract. And so it's, of course, to me... Teach me tonight. Teach me. Teach my community. Teach communities. What should we do? How should we live this? And I just want to add one little piece of Torah and then we're going to...

Moses begins his conversation tomorrow and he says something that for us should trigger a connection because on Monday night when we open up the book of Lamentations we'll begin, Eicha Yashva. Eicha means, How did she sit alone? The city of Jerusalem, the word Eicha means How? And the very first thing Moses will say tomorrow morning after he tells the people the Devarim, his first Devarim is a question, Eicha Esa? How will I lift up? Moses was essentially saying, This is our work. Our work is to go into places that are dark and to lift them up. Moses was saying, We go into places that are painful and we lift them up.

Moses was saying that the work of spiritual practitioners and people who have their hearts open is to ask a fundamental question. If last week's question was, What sparks are here for me? This week's question is, Love lifts us up. Love lifts us up. What needs to be lifted here? Because we go down. On Monday night we will sit on the floor, Eicha Yashva, we sit. The whole day we're down. The temple has come down. Conversations are down. The country feels down.

Eicha Esa? How can we lift up? How can we elevate? That's the question. So I want to send a prayer out tonight. On this Shabbat, before Tisha B'Av, on a Shabbat where conversations and sometimes even moods can feel down. At a time in our country when conversations and political environments can leave many of us feeling down. First of all, we have permission to go down. It's okay.

It's okay to let it get really bad. And then we ask ourselves, Eicha Esa? How will we lift up? How will we lift up? And I would argue, I would share, that love, again and again and again,

is the answer. So I was on the phone today with a friend of mine, and she said, I said, how are you? She's a rabbi, spiritual practitioner, super high evolved individual. She doesn't have these kinds of things. She doesn't get like upset, depressed. She's always in a very holy place. So I said to her, you know, hard week. She said, I know. I said, how are you feeling? She said, down.

I said, yeah, it's kind of like, it's pretty intense. The inertia, the feeling of being down. And she said, yeah, I just need help sometimes lifting up. I just need help sometimes, she said, remembering my biggest self. So I invite you all tonight, when you leave, and you talk to your loved ones, you go to dinner, maybe tomorrow, maybe Sunday, maybe Monday, to ask this question. What are the things that need to be lifted up? And how do you do that? How does love lift you? How does love change a situation from something that feels like it's down to feeling like it's something that could be up? This Yirida, going down to go up, is the primary movement of redemption and healing.

I bless each and every one of you with the strength and the courage to be able to go to those places and to lift things up. Echa Esa. How will we lift up? That's the question.

As you rise.